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ABSTRACT

This study examined 35 first- and second-year teachers' perceptions of several current issues pertinent to their profession. Analysis of data from an open-ended questionnaire found that teachers' perceptions of their beginning teaching experiences were not all positive, though they were still satisfied that they had chosen to become teachers. Their responses fell into the four main categories of time management, discipline, parental involvement, and preparation. The teachers felt frustration due to lack of time to complete all their mundane chores and paperwork. They were overwhelmed at times due to the behavior problems they had to handle and were often frustrated over lack of parental concern and their inability to communicate in the most effective ways with parents. They voiced a need for more courses in classroom management and discipline, because their preservice training had not prepared them for the vast demands of teaching and the specific jobs required in specific schools. (SM)

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PERCEPTIONS OF BEGINNING ELEMENTARY TEACHERS:
NOVICE TEACHERS REFLECT UPON THEIR BEGINNING EXPERIENCES

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**PERCEPTIONS OF BEGINNING ELEMENTARY TEACHERS:
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Although the distance between a student's desk and a teacher's desk is short in linear feet, it is probably the longest psychological distance that these young adults have traveled in such a brief time. Just what is expected of a person who assumes the role of teacher (Cruickshank & Callahan, 1983). The primary purpose of this qualitative study was to determine the perception of beginning teachers. By better understanding novice teacher's perceptions of their beginning teaching experiences, we may find ways to prevent the concept of reality shock during their first year of teaching (Veenman, 1984).

Methodology

The subjects for this study were obtained from a sample of 35 first and second year teachers employed by a county school system in the Southeast United States. Teachers were given an open-ended questionnaire and asked to reflect on their own experiences during their first or second year of teaching.

Teachers were requested to write their reflections on their perceptions of several current issues pertinent to their chosen profession. Conclusions were drawn from cross-case analysis.

Results

Results of this study indicated that the perceptions of beginning teachers fell into four main categories which included time management, discipline, parental involvement, and preparation.

Time Management

Charles Senter (1995) views teaching as a good and rewarding job. However, according to Cruickshank & Callahan (1983), if teachers were unable to deal with personal and professional tasks, the results would be stress. Beginning teachers recognized the importance of personal and professional time management.

Beth wrote, "paperwork takes up too big of a portion of my day. It takes away from my teaching. Also making copies of student work takes too much time. There are not enough textbooks for my class and the copier is broken it seems everytime I need to use it. This takes up too much time."

Dan observed, "Behavior problems eat up a lot of time. Paperwork eats up the rest."

Cindy noted that she was not surprised at the amount of paperwork, however there is no time during the day to do it. "It all must be done after school and on my own time." Becky noted,

"There is an unbelievable amount of paperwork. Reports that are needed, lesson plans, notes home to parents almost everyday concerning discipline, grading papers, conferences, etc."

Carol summed it up for everyone when she wrote, "The only problem I've had in dealing with time management is that there never seems to be enough time after dealing with discipline problems."

Parental Involvement

Students expressed concern about their parents not knowing what they were doing. According to these students, there was little parental responsibility in the home (Britt 1995). Becky recognized like these students, the lack of parental responsibility when she wrote, "My most disappointing experience with the parents are their lack of concern. I have had a parent not respond to a note about the need for a conference on two occasions. It seems that some of the prents do not want to be bothered."

Another teacher noted, "last year I had virtually no parental involvement or interest." Marian wrote, "most of the parents I have met with only deny their child's problem."

According to Dan, "There is little parental involvement with my students. The teacher is on his/her own." Janice added, "dealing with parents has been a big eye opener. "I've been surprised when they defend their child even when he/she is wrong. I think I would benefit from a course in teacher/parent communication. It is quite a challenge to please all parents and say the correct words to them."

Discipline

Classroom discipline and classroom management may be used as code words to represent various difficulties and to point out a lack of skills beginning teachers need assistance in (McDonald & Elias 1983). According to Taylor and Dale (1971) the more problems beginning teachers encountered, the more likely they would be to leave teaching.

In the area of discipline, this went together with time management. Dan said it eats up most of his time. Joe recognized that he is unable to teach in the depth he wants to because most of his time is spent on behavior management. One teacher out of frustration wrote,

“We were taught many different reinforcement schedules. If behavior modification was my only goal, then this would be reasonable. However, academics cannot be pushed aside for discipline. More simple plans are needed.”

Janice pleaded, “please take more courses in classroom management and parent-teacher relationships. These are two areas that I still long for extra advice and help with as a teacher.”

Preparation

Teachers have difficulties in their first year because they are essentially undertrained for the vast demands which teaching entails, and beginning teachers have a general training and are not trained for a specific job in a specific school (Ryan 1979). Most beginning teachers echoed this same message. Marian wrote,

“Teaching can’t be taught in black and white in books. I learned a lot of helpful techniques from college, but the best training is when you actually have your own classroom and you have to figure things out yourself. In college they can tell you how to handle different situations, but until you encounter them yourself, you won’t really understand.”

From Joan’s perspective, “I have been able to put into practice most of what I was taught during student teaching. I learned more during student teaching than the 3 ½ years of my education program.

Another beginning teacher wrote, “The biggest difference between college and my classroom would probably be the responsibility. In college I’m not sure I really thought of the responsibility of preparing these children for the next grade. Knowing it is my job to have them ready for the next grade is a huge responsibility I tackle everyday.”

Marty saw no direct connection between the theory in education classes and the real world. He felt a lot of what he was taught did not relate.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this study found that teachers perceptions of their beginning teaching experiences were not all positive. Even though they felt frustration due to lack of time to do all the many mundane chores and paperwork; overwhelmed at times due to the behavior problems to be dealt with; lack of concern and inability to communicate in the most effective way with parents, and desiring more courses in classroom management and discipline, most wrote that they would do it over again. They would choose teaching as their profession again. Even through all the perceived problems, there was a resounding yes, they wanted to teach and continue to teach because they loved it. Dan wrote,

“yes, it is still extremely rewarding. Teaching children to believe in themselves and have dedication and pride in what they do and to never give up.”

Gail said, “the best part of teaching is seeing their faces light up when they begin to understand. I love to see the growth and success of the kids.”

Advice these teachers offer to other beginning teachers are:

Take advantage of all the spare time now because there isn't really time in the real world. Take advantage of everything you learn in college; it can be put to use. Nick suggests you get into the classroom and make sure it is for you before you get too far along in college. Bob added, “Don't give up. Don't sweat the small stuff!”

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